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Cinema for the Common Good: Municipalisation and Mass Entertainment in early twentieth-century Scotland:

In the years during and immediately after the First World War, local authorities across Scotland assumed or contemplated assuming responsibility for the provision of entertainment locally through the medium of cinema.¹ Although interest was widespread, the practical application of such ideas was more limited and in all but one case, Clydebanks, failed to endure beyond the early 1920s.² Viewed thus, the story of municipal cinema constitutes, at best, a modest footnote to the broader history of Scotland's engagement with the moving image. Yet at the time its significance appeared altogether more profound. For the cinema industry itself, the intervention of local authorities appeared the latest in a series of challenges that had threatened the viability of commercial film exhibition. During the war, cinema's impact on the moral character of its predominantly young audience had been subject to prolonged critical scrutiny, while, at the height of the conflict, the imposition of taxation on admissions, the introduction of Daylight Saving, and the use of large theatres to screen profitable 'super' films suggested that cinema's place in the provision of entertainment was far from secure.³ Municipal meddling further aggravated such concerns, to the extent that in

¹ Included were towns in the central belt such as Paisley, Falkirk, and Kirkcaldy, *Entertainer and Scottish Kinema Record* [ESKR], 27 Mar. p.12; 24 Apr. 1920, p.12; *Scottish Kinema Record* [SKR], 28 May 1921, p.1; and areas further north from Perth, to Stornoway, and Huntly in Aberdeenshire, *SKR*, 22 May 1920, p.14; 1 Apr. 1922, p.1; *Aberdeen Daily Journal* [ADJ], 15 Mar. 1921, p.3; *Kinematograph Weekly* [KW], 24 Mar. 1921, p.82; 16 Mar. 1922, p.73.

² This may be contrasted with the position in Norway, where, from 1913, municipal ownership became both widespread and enduring, see Julia Bohlmann, 'Early Municipal Cinema' in John Caughie, Trevor Griffiths and Maria Velez Serna (eds), *Early Cinema in Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2018), 91-109, at 92; Gunnar Iversen, 'Norway', in Tytti Soila, Astrid Soderbergh Widding, Gunnar Iversen (eds), *Nordic National Cinemas* (London and New York, 1998), 102-41, at 106.

³ Rachael Low, *The History of the British Film 1914-1918* (London, 1950), ch.III; Trevor Griffiths, *Cinema and Cinema-going in Scotland, 1896-1950* (Edinburgh, 2012), 98-109;

1918 the trade paper *The Bioscope* saw it as ‘the most pernicious form of competition which the man of commerce has to face’.⁴ If the trade press would expend many column inches charting local authority deliberations on this subject and their outcomes, the significance of decisions taken in council chambers across the country were felt well beyond the industry itself.

For its most determined advocates, municipal cinema promised to extend the sphere of State activity beyond the limits envisaged by earlier generations of reformers, calling into question in the process previous demarcations between public and private enterprise. Enthusiasm for local authority action was most evident among those I.L.P. councillors looking to build on the arguments advanced by Labour leaders, including Keir Hardie and John Wheatley, as to the legitimate extent and future direction of municipal activity. They looked to broaden the scope for collective intervention beyond areas in which a natural tendency to monopoly hindered the ‘normal’ functioning of market mechanisms to take in activities in which the legitimacy of the profit motive had rarely been questioned. Yet ideas on the relationship between popular culture and the cause of social reform, in Scotland most consistently pursued through the cause of temperance, were not fixed.⁵ Across Britain, elements within the labour movement had in the years before 1914 developed a deep distrust of the commercial leisure industry, based on its perceived tendency to encourage a preference for frivolous diversion over the kind of intellectual and moral improvement likely to promote a consciousness of the need for wider change.⁶ Cinema’s place within that debate was

Trevor Griffiths, ‘Quantifying an “Essential Social Habit”: The Entertainments Tax and British Cinemagoing, 1916-1934’, *Film History*, 31 (2019), 1-26.

⁴ *Bioscope*, 19 Sep. 1918, p.4.

⁵ Anthony Cooke, *A History of Drinking: The Scottish pub since 1700* (Edinburgh, 2015), ch.4.

⁶ Christopher Waters, *British Socialists and the Politics of Popular Culture, 1884-1914* (Manchester, 1990); Stephen G. Jones, *The British Labour Movement and Film, 1918-1939* (London and New York, 1987), esp. chs. 1 and 2; Stephen G. Jones, ‘Labour, Society and the Drink Question in Britain, 1918-1939’, *Historical Journal*, XXX (1987), 105-22.

ambiguous, for while it was seen to promote abstinence by offering a welcome alternative to the intoxications of drink, the priority it apparently gave to short-term amusement over longer term education led many to question its ability to elevate the moral and political sensibilities of the masses. The career of municipal cinema in Scotland would give renewed impetus to that debate.

Advocates of local authority action were not confined to the political left. For many, cinema's main attraction centred on its revenue-raising potential. Set alongside other factors, including legal determinations of the extent of municipal power and contrasting ideas as to the kind of cultural life to be encouraged locally, a broad range of circumstances shaped conclusions as to the wisdom of municipalisation. The purpose of this paper, then, is to locate the idea and practice of municipal cinema firmly within the political, economic, and social context of early-twentieth-century Scotland and to evaluate its role in advancing and at times complicating thinking on public ownership and cultural provision more generally. In the first part, the debate is located in the longer run context of thinking on the municipal provision of social services and its outcome traced in decisions which varied between the outright rejection and partial or complete acceptance of a cinema run for the public good. Active in this process were some of the most prominent figures in Scotland's twentieth-century history, a leading role being assumed by a future Secretary of State, Tom Johnston, while a walk-on part was allotted poet, committed nationalist and, in this context, Montrose councillor, Christopher Murray Grieve ('Hugh MacDiarmid'). Having considered the wider forces shaping municipal cinema's progress, the second part of the paper centres on areas where the decision to assume full responsibility for the running of amusements was taken: three towns in the heavy industrial west of Scotland- Clydebank, Johnstone, and Kirkintilloch- and a

burgh beyond the central belt, Montrose.⁷ The purpose here is to examine how the thinking behind municipal experiments was applied in practice through the conduct of businesses, particularly as regards pricing, programming, and the utilisation of profits. The most sustained insights on such points is provided by the metal working and coal mining centre of Kirkintilloch in Dunbartonshire. Here, the idea of municipal cinema in Scotland was initiated in 1914 and the arguments for its promotion most clearly articulated. The survival of financial records covering much of its career enables the internal functioning of the enterprise to be closely reconstructed. The discussion begins with a consideration of debates on public ownership in general and cultural provision in particular in the years before cinema came to be seen as a legitimate and productive sphere of municipal operations.

II.

Scotland, in particular its larger burghs, had participated fully in the growth in municipal activity over the second half of the nineteenth century. Operating within broadly accepted parameters that limited state involvement to areas in which the usual market disciplines were seen not to apply, corporations from Glasgow to Aberdeen assumed control initially of local supplies of water and gas, extending over later decades to electricity and intra-urban transport systems.⁸ Through the acquisition of such assets, it was argued, uniformity of provision could be secured at the lowest practicable cost, at the same time

⁷ Three of these centres had populations below 30,000, small towns by contemporary British standards. For the importance in Scotland of cinema in such areas, see John Caughie, 'Small-Town Cinema in Scotland: The Particularity of Place', in Judith Thissen and Clemens Zimmermann (eds), *Cinema Beyond the City: Small-Town and rural film culture in Europe* (London, 2016), 23-37; and Caughie, 'Cinema and Cinema-going in Small Towns' in Caughie, Griffiths, and Velez-Serna (eds), *Early Cinema*, 52-67.

⁸ Irene Maver, 'Glasgow's Civic Government', in W. Hamish Fraser and Irene Maver (eds), *Glasgow. Volume II: 1830 to 1912* (Manchester, 1996), 441-86; Clive H. Lee, 'Local Government', in W. Hamish Fraser and Clive H. Lee (eds), *Aberdeen, 1800-2000: A New History* (East Linton, 2000), 236-64.

enabling authorities to influence the pace of civic improvement.⁹ In England, the latter idea was most fully developed in Birmingham, where profits from municipal undertakings funded physical and cultural improvement within the city, most obviously through provision of a municipal art gallery.¹⁰ In Scotland, by contrast, services were not to be run for profit, so that up to the late nineteenth century, the prime justification for public control remained the reduction of charges for the direct benefit of consumers.¹¹ By the late 1890s, the consensus even among Labour politicians, was that the full potential of municipal ownership had been realised and that further extensions of public ownership were impracticable.¹² That view would be revised from 1900 as the state of local authority finances, dependent on an increasingly inelastic revenue source, the rates, worsened. A slowdown in house building, which endured across much of the first two decades of the new century, alongside enhanced municipal responsibility for a growing range of social services, placed inevitable upward pressure on the rates if revenue was to keep pace with obligations.¹³ Faced with growing demands from business and residential interests for the exercise of municipal economy, authorities faced a choice between retrenchment and securing additional sources of income. Glasgow's response, from 1908, was to determine that profits from the city's trams should be used to moderate the burden on ratepayers. Labour's initial reaction was to criticise what it described as 'market Capitalism', which placed the interests of property-owners above those

⁹ Robert Millward, 'The Political Economy of Urban Utilities', and Robert J. Morris, 'Structure, Culture and Society in British Towns', in Martin Daunton (ed.), *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain. Volume III: 1840-1950* (Cambridge, 2000), 315-49, 395-426.

¹⁰ Martin Daunton, 'Introduction', in Daunton (ed.), *Cambridge Urban History*, 1-56, at 27-8.

¹¹ Hamish Fraser, 'Municipal Socialism and Social Policy', in Robert J. Morris and Richard Rodger (eds), *The Victorian City: A reader in British urban history, 1820-1914* (London, 1993), 258-80, at 262.

¹² James J. Smyth, *Labour in Glasgow, 1896-1926: Socialism, suffrage, sectarianism* (East Linton, 2000), 48-9.

¹³ Martin Daunton, *Trusting Leviathan: The politics of taxation in Britain, 1799-1914* (Cambridge, 2001), ch.9.

of workers who used the trams.¹⁴ Yet, in the final years before the outbreak of war, Labour would develop a creative approach to municipal enterprise consistent with the promotion of its own agenda. In Glasgow, John Wheatley would argue for the use of profits from the tramways to fund the building of artisan housing.¹⁵ More general arguments were also developed. In 1910, in support of a bill designed to enable local authorities to extend the range of activities available to them, Keir Hardie produced a pamphlet entitled *The Common Good*, a reference to the peculiarly Scottish institution of the Common Good Fund, derived from assets granted to burghs whose use was intended for the ‘common good’ of all residents. Such a fund, which was wholly independent of the rates would, Keir Hardie argued, prove invaluable as an aid to the development of municipal trading, the profits from which could be paid into the fund, augmenting the resources on which councils could draw to finance further improvements. While Keir Hardie primarily had in mind improved access to the necessities of life, such as fuel and essential foods, his proposals also allowed for the provision of cultural amenities, including municipal theatre.¹⁶

Here again, there was a Scottish model on which to draw. Since the later nineteenth century, larger burghs had embraced the cause of rational recreation, building on the work of voluntary agencies concerned to promote the cause of temperance, by offering entertainments at cheap rates on Saturdays, enabling groups previously denied it to seek amusement outside the home untainted by associations with alcohol, while at the same time consolidating the idea of the Sabbath as a day of rest and contemplation.¹⁷ By the turn of the century, concerts,

¹⁴ Fraser, ‘Municipal Socialism’, 276-7; Smyth, *Labour in Glasgow*, 64.

¹⁵ Smyth, *Labour in Glasgow*, 67-9.

¹⁶ J. Keir Hardie, *The Common Good: An Essay in Municipal Government* (Manchester nd); for the Common Good Fund, see James Muirhead, *The Law and Practice Relating to Municipal and Police Government in Burghs in Scotland, consisting of the Text of The Town Councils (Scotland) Acts of 1900 and 1903, and The Burgh Police (Scotland) Acts, 1892 to 1903* (Glasgow and Edinburgh, 1905), 646.

¹⁷ Elspeth King, ‘Popular Culture in Glasgow’, in R.A. Cage (ed.), *The Working Class in Glasgow, 1750-1914* (Beckenham, 1987), 142-87; Paul Maloney, *Scotland and the Music*

often incorporating the cinematograph within their varied programmes, were being held under local authority auspices in Town and City Halls in, among other places, Glasgow and Clydebank.¹⁸ For politicians increasingly receptive to the idea of municipal enterprise and, in the case of Kirkintilloch, anxious to measure progress against that achieved by its larger neighbour, the appeal of such provision was obvious. When initially proposed by local councillors in January 1914, the intention was to investigate the practicability of the burgh mounting its own series of concerts.¹⁹ From this, debate moved on to the installation of cinematograph equipment in the local Town Hall to enable the burgh to run its own shows. As Bailie Gibson, the I.L.P.'s first representative on the council, made clear, the gain was not intended to be merely financial: 'it was not a question as to who was going to lose or gain money, but who was going to lose or gain character'. Local authority control, he argued, would maximise benefits, for 'If they ran this entertainment themselves, they could maintain a higher moral standard than an outsider'.²⁰ This may be seen as a pointed reference to the private lessee running picture shows in the Town Hall, Jim Clark of O.K. Pictures, who the previous month had provided evidence of the dangers attending entertainments guided solely by commercial calculations by staging a wrestling contest for the 'Bantamweight Championship of Scotland', the trophy being provided by Clark himself. The bout attracted

Hall, 1850-1914 (Manchester, 2003), 191-3; Irene Maver, 'Leisure and Culture: The Nineteenth Century', in Fraser and Lee (eds), *Aberdeen, 1800-2000*, 398-421, at 402-3; Trevor Griffiths, 'Work, Leisure and Time', in Trevor Griffiths and Graeme Morton (eds), *A History of Everyday Life in Scotland, 1800-1900* (Edinburgh, 2010), 170-95, at 187.

¹⁸ Griffiths, *Cinema and Cinema-going*, 35; Clydebank, West Dunbartonshire Archives, Clydebank Heritage Centre [WDA], CB/1/1/27, Clydebank Town Council Minutes, Hall and Baths Committee, 29 Oct. 1918; *Clydebank and Renfrew Press* [CRP], 16 Aug. 1918, p.3.

¹⁹ For a comparison of Kirkintilloch and Glasgow, distinctly unflattering to the latter, see Thomas Johnston, *Memories* (London, 1952), 14; Kirkintilloch, East Dunbartonshire Archive [EDA], 1/1/14, Burgh of Kirkintilloch, Minutes of Town Council, Hall and Park Committee, 29 Jan. 1914.

²⁰ *The Kirkintilloch Herald and Lenzie, Kilsyth, Campsie and Cumbernauld Press* [KH], 15 Apr. 1914, p.5; Gibson's election to the Council in 1911 was marked by a speech from Johnston, appropriately from the steps of the Watson Fountain, *Kirkintilloch Gazette, Lenzie and Campsie Reporter* [KG], 10 Nov. 1911, p.2..

strong criticism from councillors on the Hall Committee, sufficient to extract an undertaking from Clark that it would never be repeated.²¹ The case for direct control of offerings at the Town Hall had, nevertheless, been strengthened.

For some on the left, then, the cinema, subject to appropriate regulation, could prove an effective vehicle of moral improvement. Links between the I.L.P. and the cinema trade in the west of Scotland were close, reflected most obviously in the figure of J.J. Bennell, himself a keen temperance advocate who ran a large hall, the Wellington Palace, in Glasgow's Gorbals district. Here, the cause of respectable recreation was furthered through a prohibition on the screening of fight films.²² Indeed, such was the reputation secured by Bennell and his company B.B. Pictures, Ltd., that Keir Hardie felt no qualms about acquiring shares in the business.²³ Overall, Clark's lapse in taste apart, the content of shows occasioned little unease in the years to 1914, so that local authorities were broadly content to operate within a framework by which they oversaw regulations covering the buildings within which shows were staged, while leaving the material being screened to the discretion of entrepreneurs.²⁴ If municipalisation was not provoked by concerns over any general moral failings on the part of commercial exhibitors, for some in the labour movement it offered the prospect of realising fully the potential of what Tom Johnston saw as a 'great method of education'.²⁵ The particular quality cinema possessed, in potentially being at one and the

²¹ KH, 25 Mar. p.1; 15 Apr. p.8; 13 May 1914, p.8; EDA, 1/1/14, Hall and Park Committee, 2, 30 Apr. 1914.

²² Griffiths, *Cinema and Cinema-going*, 23-4, 39; Maria Velez Serna, 'Fixed-site Cinemas and the First Film Renters', in Caughie, Griffiths and Velez Serna (eds), *Early Scottish Cinema*, 33-51.

²³ Edinburgh, National Records of Scotland [NRS], BT2/7670/12, The B.B. Pictures, Ltd., Return of Allotments, 21 Oct.- 9 Nov. 1910.

²⁴ Griffiths, *Cinema and Cinema-going*, 62-3; Julia Bohlmann, 'Regulating and Mediating the Social Role of Cinema in Scotland, 1896-1933', unpublished Ph.D. thesis (University of Glasgow, 2015) ch.2; Julia Bohlmann, 'A Licence not to Censor: The Cinematograph Act 1909 in Scotland', *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 15 (2018), 491-512.

²⁵ KH, 15 Apr. 1914, p.5.

same time both improving and popular, promised to solve a conundrum which had long troubled those seeking a distinctively socialist approach to leisure. Such qualities had enduring purchase on thinking, acquiring further value in the months after the Armistice of 1918. When Montrose Council turned to consider proposals to run picture shows at the Burgh Hall, their potential contribution to public order was stressed by one Bailie, offering a view of the town as a potential centre for political disaffection that some may have struggled to recognise:

With the present demand for harmless recreation, it was advisable for them to provide it, and so prevent the people wandering about the streets, a prey to agitators. Keep the people amused and enjoying themselves, and there would be far less trouble with them.²⁶

For all the emphasis on cinema's improving, pacifying tendencies, other calculations were also evident. In particular, the financial return anticipated from film exhibitions figured heavily in both Kirkintilloch and Montrose. The industry's transparent profitability either side of the First World War effectively stilled doubts as to any risks attending municipalisation. High rates of company formation and generous returns on investment offered material measures of seemingly inexhaustible prosperity. Provincial Cinematograph Theatres, Ltd., the largest cinema circuit in Britain before the war, which ran two halls in Edinburgh and one on Glasgow's Sauchiehall Street, paid 20% on its ordinary shares across the last two years of peace, while a wholly local concern the Scottish Electric Picture Palaces,

²⁶ *Montrose, Arbroath and Brechin Review; and Forfar and Kincardineshire Advertiser [MR]*, 14 Mar. 1919, p.4.

Ltd., saw its profits rise from £615 2s. 4d. to £2,326 7s. 10. over the same period.²⁷ Such figures would be dwarfed in the immediate post-war years, as the release of pent up consumer demand fed a short-lived economic boom.²⁸ Such was the effect on the cinema trade that one candidate for municipal honours in Dundee could refer to picture houses as ‘veritable Klondykes’.²⁹ Dividend payments of 90% by the Aberdeen Picture Palaces, Ltd., in 1920 and a surplus approaching £16,000 over the period 1919-21 for the Scottish Electric Picture Palaces suggested that such language was not overdone.³⁰ Perhaps unsurprisingly then, when Kirkintilloch’s civic leaders met to debate the proposal to run picture shows in 1914, the possibility of financial failure was discounted. Gibson, long an advocate of municipal cinema, declared himself unable to see ‘how we are going to make a loss’.³¹ Five years later in Montrose, the Provost saw it as important that the Council share in the industry’s manifest prosperity.³² A twin gain was anticipated in each case: the greater number of lets of the local hall would boost rental income to the council, while the profits would also be available for local use. Cinema thus promised to meet both the political and financial needs of local authorities across Scotland in the early decades of the century.

If this suggests that the case for municipalisation was unanswerable, a number of obstacles and points of difference needed to be addressed before councils could proceed. Legal doubts posed an early challenge to Kirkintilloch’s ambitions. Despite the confidence

²⁷ *The Kinematograph Year Book, Diary and Directory, 1915* (London, 1915), the two Edinburgh halls were the Picture House and the New Picture House, both on Princes Street. The Glasgow venue was the Picture House; *KW*, 6 Sept. 1917, p.103; NRS, BT2/7567/24-5, Scottish Electric Picture Palaces, Ltd., Balance Sheets at 28 Jun. 1913; 30 Jun. 1914.

²⁸ Stephen N. Broadberry, ‘The Emergence of Mass Unemployment: Explaining macroeconomic trends in Britain during the trans-World War 1 period’, *Economic History Review*, XLIII (1990), 271-82.

²⁹ *Scottish Kinema Record [SKR]*, 30 Oct. 1920, p.13.

³⁰ *ESKR*, 17 Apr. 1920, p.14; NRS, BT2/7567/31-2, Balance Sheets, at 30 Jun. 1919; at 30 Jun. 1920.

³¹ *KH*, 15 Apr. 1914, p.5.

³² *MR*, 14 Mar. 1919, p.4.

expressed by Gibson and Johnston, a final decision on whether to proceed was delayed following advice from permanent officials that any losses could not be chargeable to the rates.³³ In Clydebank, in 1918, the scheme for municipal control faced opposition from the private lessee whom the Council planned to replace and the Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association, the collective body for picture house proprietors, accompanied by a letter from the Secretary for Scotland seeking clarification of the grounds on which the authority was proposing to proceed.³⁴ As this suggests, the presence of competing commercial interests, provided a ready point of challenge to municipal initiatives, and in all the cases under review at least one cinema was already active locally. The most concerted action came at Dunoon, where the local Picture House brought a prosecution against the Council following its decision to take over the lease of the Pavilion, surrendered by the Clyde Entertainments Co., Ltd., in February 1921, and to run the hall as the Municipal Picture House.³⁵ The case turned on the burden placed on a private business by requiring it effectively to support a competitor through the rates, but primarily on the argument that the provision of cinematic entertainment lay outwith the statutory powers of the Council. The judgment delivered in the Court of Session in June 1921 found for the commercial Picture House. The Corporation's powers were held to be defined by the Burgh Police (Scotland) Act of 1903, which, while it enabled authorities to construct halls and lease the same to private operators, also limited the direct provision of entertainments by the municipality to 'music by bands, concerts, or otherwise'.³⁶

³³ EDA, 1/1/14, Town Council, 13 Apr. 1914; *KH*, 15 Apr. 1914, p.5; *KG*, 17 Apr. 1914, p.6.

³⁴ *CRP*, 16 Aug. p.3; 13 Sep. 1918, p.6; WDA, CB/1/1/27, Hall and Baths Committee, 27 Aug.; 29 Oct. 1918.

³⁵ NRS, CS275/84/10, Note of Suspension and Interdict for the Dunoon Picture House Co., Ltd. Against the Provost, Magistrates and Councillors of the Burgh of Dunoon, Statement of Facts; *Dunoon Advertiser and District Courier*, 24 Feb. 1921, p.2; *Dunoon Herald and Cowal Advertiser [DH]*, 25 Feb. 1921, p.2; *Dunoon Observer and Argyllshire Standard [DO]*, 26 Feb. p.1; 25 Jun. 1921, p.4.

³⁶ *DH*, 1 Jul. 1921, p.2; NRS, CS275/84/10, Reclaiming Note for Respondents in Note of Suspension and Interdict, Opinion.

The cinema industry welcomed the clarification and anticipated the curtailment of municipal ambitions from that point.³⁷

That this did not happen immediately is testimony both to the legal ingenuity of civic leaders, and to the continued utility which then attached to the idea of municipalisation. In Kirkintilloch, the objections raised by the Town Clerk were overcome by transferring responsibility for running the Municipal Pictures to a committee of three councillors, including Gibson and Johnston, on whom liabilities for losses would fall rather than on the generality of rate-payers. All profits would be transferred to the Burgh Treasurer and placed at the disposal of the Common Good.³⁸ In Montrose, despite a legal challenge by proprietors of the nearby Empress Picture House, officials were of the view that operations at the Burgh Hall were within the law. The Hall, they advised, formed part of the Common Good, a Fund independent of the rates and controlled by the local authority under the Town Councils (Scotland) Act of 1900.³⁹ The constraints of local Police Acts, which applied to burghs created after 1833 all of which lacked the independent resource of a Common Good Fund, did not apply.⁴⁰ Even then, legal obstacles could be overcome. A matter of days after the Court of Session judgment, councillors in Dunoon were reported to have concluded an agreement with the manager of the Pavilion, who would remain in charge of the business at least until October that year. In place of a salary, he would have the right to the first £120 of profit made, any sum in excess of that to go to the Council, which would also receive £10 a week in rent. The Picture House's owners promptly returned to the Court of Session, arguing that the arrangement constituted a covert continuation of municipal control, the allowance of

³⁷ *KW*, 14 Jul. 1921, pp.16, 61; *SKR*, 16 Jul. 1921, p.1.

³⁸ Johnston, *Memories*, 22; *KH*, 14 Jul. 1915, p.6.

³⁹ *SKR*, 24 Dec. 1921, p.1; *KW*, 29 Dec. 1921, p.43; *MR*, 26 Dec. 1921, p.7; 13 Apr. 1923, p.6.

⁴⁰ Muirhead, *Law and Practice*, 245; NRS, CS275/84/10, Statement of Facts.

£120 to the manager being equivalent to his former salary.⁴¹ The case proceeded no further, as by the time their Lordships came to deliberate, the Pavilion had closed for the winter.⁴² By then, it was clear that the hopes which the trade placed in legal barriers to municipal control had been disappointed.

A more insistent challenge came locally from those who remained unconvinced of the benefits, either moral or financial, to be derived from direct control. So, although many authorities considered this course, only a minority opted for outright municipalisation. Doubts were voiced as to the most appropriate use of local amenities. Halls built at public expense were intended, so some argued, for use by local organisations and for important civic events. The Town Hall in Clydebank, by the late 1920s, hosted political meetings, as well as gatherings organised by a range of voluntary agencies, including the United Free Church.⁴³ For critics, the ability of the halls to act as the hub of a vibrant associational culture would be threatened by their use as cinemas, committing the venues to single, dedicated use at times of greatest popularity. For local authorities, such doubts had to be weighed against the debt often incurred in the construction of such buildings. Kirkintilloch Town Hall was funded by means of voluntary donations and a bequest, but it still required the Council to take out a loan extending over eighty years to ensure the completion of what some dubbed the burgh's 'White Elephant'.⁴⁴ In order to pay off the debt, maintain the fabric of the building, and cast off any charge of redundancy, the number of lets was crucial. Larger centres could rely on regular visits by touring theatrical and variety companies, which sustained the programme of

⁴¹ *DO*, 23 Jul. 1921, p.1; NRS, CS251/1903, Court of Session: Unextracted Processes, 3rd Arrangement, Inner House, 1st Division, Petition and Complaint, Dunoon Picture House Co., Ltd., 3-5.

⁴² NRS, CS251/1903, Interlocutors in Petitions and Complaint, 1 Mar. 1922.

⁴³ *Clydebank Press [CP]*, 4 Jan. p.4; 11 Jan. p.4; 15 Feb. p.4; 12 Apr. p.4; 25 Oct. p.4; 8 Nov. 1929, p.4.

⁴⁴ Mary Baird, E. Corroon, T.D. Dewar, R. McMeekin, M. Pitcairn, N. Scott, N. Stewart (compilers), *The Diary of a Town Hall* (Kirkintilloch, 2007), np.

Corporation Concerts mounted in Glasgow's city halls through the autumn and winter. Smaller burghs, including Kirkintilloch, lacked such consistent throughput. For them, the cinematograph, able to offer a frequent change in programmes, offered some guarantee of a regular and predictable income. Its value was further enhanced in wartime, as travel restrictions and manpower losses reduced the number of touring companies and therefore the potential number of lets.⁴⁵ The propensity to turn to the cinema to maintain the viability of local venues could only increase in such circumstances and a rash of installations was reported shortly after the war in places as far apart as Maxwelltown, Turriff, and Innerleithen.⁴⁶

The growing ubiquity of the cinematograph did not go unchallenged, however. In 1920, councils in Perth and Falkirk voted against the running of municipal pictures in one case and in the other the let of the Town Hall for film exhibitions. For both, the view was that the venues would work better for the community if they remained available for hire by local organisations.⁴⁷ Such arguments continued to be rehearsed even where municipal cinemas were active, surfacing when their future was in doubt. In May 1923, the Council in Montrose voted to end its involvement in the shows at the Burgh Hall. The future of the venue was now debated and tenders for the business invited. The bid favoured by most, as it offered the highest payments over the term of the five-year lease, came from the former manager of the Municipal Cinema and former councillor, James Davidson. A competing proposal from Scottish Cinema and Variety Theatres, Ltd., proprietors of the local King's Playhouse, involved paying off all existing film contracts, allowing the Council to use the hall for

⁴⁵ *KH*, 31 Jan. 1917, p.6.

⁴⁶ *ESKR*, 6 Dec. 1919, p.6; 10 Jan. 1920, p.11; *SKR*, 12 Mar. 1921, p.1.

⁴⁷ *ESKR*, 24 Apr. 1920, p.12 (Falkirk); *SKR*, 22 May 1920, p.14 (Perth).

purposes other than as a cinema.⁴⁸ The latter had a particular appeal for Councillor Grieve, ironically co-opted on to the Council in 1922 when Davidson was appointed full-time manager of the Municipal Cinema.⁴⁹ Grieve argued that the silver screen's virtual monopoly of the Burgh Hall had discouraged local amateur theatrical and musical societies from mounting productions and that the town had failed to attract major touring companies.⁵⁰

In his preference for a local, democratic, participatory recreational culture, Grieve, as the only Independent Socialist on the Council, voiced an enduring critique of popular leisure preferences on the left which, if anything, gained traction in the years after the First World war. In contrast to Kirkintilloch, the I.L.P. in Montrose saw little virtue in the cinema, one candidate in 1919 likening it to alcohol in its propensity to lull the masses 'and prevent them thinking'.⁵¹ In Dundee's first council elections after the Armistice, Labour candidates had promoted the idea of a municipal cinema for the city, although they were clear that the programmes it would offer should favour 'educational and interest films' over the standard fare of 'Deadwood Dick and Buffalo Bill'.⁵² The criticism thus implied hardened into the outright hostility of 'anti-cinemamania', as the building of new cinemas proceeded apace, at the expense, it was argued, of the city's housing needs. When the sale of the local Foresters' Hall came to be debated the following May, Labour councillors argued that it should remain available for public meetings, rather than being taken up by 'Charlie Chaplin stunts'.⁵³

⁴⁸ *Kinematograph Year Book, 1923. Tenth Year* (London, Manchester, and Glasgow, 1923), 496; *MR*, 13 Apr. p.6; 20 Apr. p.7; 18 May 1923, p.6; *Montrose Standard and Angus and Mearns Register [MS]*, 18 May 1923, p.7.

⁴⁹ *Courier [Dundee]*, 29 Aug. 1924, p.8.

⁵⁰ *MS*, 18 May 1923, p.7, 'Montrose was practically the only town where it was impossible to run local theatrical and Musical Societies, because the hall was not available for running them on Saturday nights'; see also letter by 'Noremac', 13 Apr. 1923, p.5.

⁵¹ *MR*, 7 Nov. 1919, p.6; the candidate, Ernest Wade, who finished bottom of the polls, may not have assisted his prospects by acknowledging his descent from General Wade..

⁵² *KW*, 6 Nov. 1919, p.155; *Scottish Cinema [SC]*, 10 Nov. 1919, p.14.

⁵³ Griffiths, *Cinema and Cinema-going*, 113; *SC*, 10 May 1920, p.28.

Advocates of municipal cinema did not allow such arguments to go unchallenged, and in both Montrose and Clydebank public control was presented as the most effective guarantor of continued local access, which would no longer be at the discretion of lessees.⁵⁴ In practice, however, requests for alternative lets were often blocked by claims that cinemas had committed to contracts with film distributors, which a failure to honour would involve the business in a sizeable loss. The Pictures Committee in Kirkintilloch regularly opposed moves by the local Co-operative Society to secure a Friday let on the Town Hall.⁵⁵ In Montrose, where shows were mounted six days a week, access for local bodies was allowed but almost invariably on Thursdays, the least remunerative day of the week.⁵⁶

Even where doubts created by tying halls to a single user for long periods were overcome, councils could still choose to rely on a private operator. In this case, regular rental payments would ensure a stable and predictable income, minimising risk. Such was the line taken in Kirkcaldy in May 1921, in preference to running the local Pathhead Hall directly.⁵⁷ Equally, in Inverurie, the let of the Town Hall at a rental of £200 a year for five years would pay off building debts and eliminate the £913 deficit on the Common Good Fund.⁵⁸ Overall, then, a combination of legal uncertainty, financial caution, and doubts over the cultural gain wrought by the movies predisposed many authorities against assuming full responsibility for picture shows. In cases where full municipalisation was adopted, the presence of key individuals with experience of the cinema industry was often decisive. The halls in both Montrose and Clydebank were run by figures who had a keen interest in the running of

⁵⁴ *MR*, 14 Mar. 1919, p.4; *WDA*, CB/1/1/27, Hall and Baths Committee, 12 Sep. 1918.

⁵⁵ *KH*, 12 Mar. 1919, p.6; 14 Jan. 1920, p.2; *EDA*, 1/1/21, Kirkintilloch Burgh Council, Printed Minutes, Hall, Park and Plots Committee, 3 Feb. 1921.

⁵⁶ *MS*, 5 Mar. 1920, p.1, where the hall was let for a Grand Orchestral Concert by the Misses Mackintosh.

⁵⁷ *SKR*, 28 May 1921, p.1.

⁵⁸ *SC*, 24 May, p.28; 28 Jun. 1920, p.29; see also the decision by the council in Crieff to allow the let of the Aytoun Hall as a cinema, *SKR*, 29 Apr. 1922, p.1.

picture shows: James Davidson, who had previously overseen the local Picture Palace in the former and William Wilson, curator of the Town Hall and Superintendent of the Baths, in the latter. Indeed, it was only with Wilson's death at the age of 70 in August 1932 that the last municipal cinema active in Scotland would close.⁵⁹ A similar reliance on commercial expertise was evident elsewhere. At Johnstone, everyday oversight was in the hands of William Rankin, formerly manager of the local Pavilion, while film bookings for a time remained in the hands of the former private lessee.⁶⁰ Meanwhile, a paid manager, T.D. Hutchison, reported to the Kirkintilloch Pictures Committee, while from 1917, programmes were secured through the Glasgow agent of the Newcastle Film Supply Co., Arthur Dent.⁶¹ These close ties to the industry raise inevitable questions about the degree to which municipal cinemas differed in their daily operations from their commercial counterparts. The point can be pursued through decisions made as to pricing, programming, and the ways in which profits were employed. This requires us to turn to the detailed working of such businesses in those burghs where municipalisation was fully embraced.

III.

Local authorities directly provided entertainment via the moving picture in four areas: Kirkintilloch and Clydebank in Dunbartonshire, Johnstone in Renfrewshire, and Montrose in Angus. Although few in number, their characteristics are sufficiently varied to ensure that no one explanation, social, economic or political, can account for the place of all in this select list. Three were located in the heavy industrial west central belt, with Montrose the exception,

⁵⁹ *MR*, 18 Apr. 1919, p.2; 17 Feb. 1922, p.6; *MS*, 24 Mar. 1922, p.5; *CP*, 19 Aug. 1932, p.5.

⁶⁰ *SC*, 29 Mar. 1920, p.30; *ESKR*, 27 Mar. 1920, p.12; *KW*, 1 Apr. 1920, p.126.

⁶¹ *KH*, 30 Jun. 1915, p.8; In possession of Adelphi Films Ltd., Letter, T.D. Hutchison to Messrs. The Newcastle Film Supply, 25 Dec. 1917, <http://earlycinema.gla.ac.uk/blog/omeka/items/show/1601>.

an east-coast settlement dependent on fishing and tourism;⁶² three were of comparable size, with only Clydebank significantly exceeding a population range of 10,000 to 13,000 in 1921;⁶³ Labour prospered immediately after the war in the west, but singularly failed in Montrose, coming bottom of the poll in the years after the war.⁶⁴ Here, the cause of municipal cinema was taken up councillors elected on the basis of their local standing rather than according to any party affiliation. In outline, the conduct of each business also varied: in Johnstone and Montrose, municipal halls operated as did commercial picture houses six days a week, with changes of programme on Mondays and Thursdays, while in Clydebank and Kirkintilloch, shows were confined to at most two days weekly.⁶⁵ A closer examination of their detailed workings establishes the particular nature of these ventures and their place in relation to both the cinema industry as a whole and Scottish society and politics more generally.

Given that a key aim was to generate profit for the benefit of residents, it is not surprising that in pricing decisions, publicly run picture houses generally followed commercial precedent. At both Johnstone and Montrose, the cost of admission matched that which applied at local competitors, while at Clydebank a top price through the period of 9d was exceeded at only one local cinema.⁶⁶ Only in Kirkintilloch was the potential of public enterprise to provide services more cheaply than the private sector explored, and even then only briefly. In its first year, patrons of the Municipal Cinema paid between 25 and 33% less

⁶² *Scotsman*, 6 Sep. 1923, p.4.

⁶³ *Scotsman*, 24 Oct. 1922, p.8 (Kirkintilloch 11,689; Clydebank 46,506); 14 Dec. 1922, p.5 (Montrose 10,979); GB Historical GIS / University of Portsmouth, Johnstone Burgh through time | Population Statistics | Total Population, *A Vision of Britain through Time*, http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit/10360158/cube/TOT_POP (accessed 20 Jul. 2019)

⁶⁴ *MR*, 7 Nov. 1919, p.8; 5 Nov. 1920, p.5.

⁶⁵ *MR*, 14 Nov. 1919, p.1: *Kinematograph Year Book, 1921 (Eighth Year)*, 520; *CRP*, 18 Oct. 1918, p.2: *KH*, 15 Nov. 1916, p.5.

⁶⁶ The *Kinematograph Year Book* provides price ranges for most cinemas, see the editions for 1921 (*Eighth Year*), 506-7, 512; and 1930 (*Seventeenth Year*), 527, the latter for Clydebank only.

than they had to see Clark's O.K. Pictures, a reduction which according to Johnston accounted for two-thirds of the gain locally from municipalisation.⁶⁷ For the I.L.P. in particular, the inducement in a period of rapidly rising prices to use the business to contain upward pressure on living costs was great. So, when in 1916 a tax was imposed by Westminster on 'any entertainment, exhibition, performance, game and sport', while the local commercial cinema moved to add the duty to existing admission prices, charges at the Town Hall remained unchanged, the Municipal Pictures effectively paying the tax itself.⁶⁸ Thereafter, however, as the pressure on living standards eased and operating costs continued to mount, rising by between 131% and 320% over four years from 1917, price increases were enforced, to the extent that by the autumn of 1920 the cost of admission had risen by between 50% and 100% to match charges at the Municipal Picture's nearest competitor, the Pavilion.⁶⁹ The shift towards a more openly commercial approach to pricing is further indicated by a readiness to charge higher rates of admission for unusually attractive programmes. Prices of 9d. and 1s. 3d. (compared to the then 'normal' rates of 5d. and 9d.) were charged in May 1920 for Mack Sennett's five-reel production *Tommy Atkins in Berlin*, and an end-of-season programme featuring the combined talents of Charlie Chaplin, Mary Pickford, and Douglas Fairbanks.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ The changes formed part of a continued debate between Johnston and Bailie Macindoe over the financial gains arising from municipal control, *KH*, 31 Jan. p.6; 7 Feb. 1917, p.8; *KG*, 2 Feb. 1917, p.3.

⁶⁸ *Scotsman*, 7 Apr. p.3; 11 Apr. p.7; 13 Apr. 1916, p.6; *Manchester Guardian* [*MG*], 5 Apr. p.4; 6 Apr. p.5; 7 Apr. 1916, p.6; London, The National Archives [TNA], CUST 143/65, Entertainments Tax vol.6, Amusement Tax- Draft Scheme, 7; *KH*, 17 May, p.6; 24 May 1916, p.4.

⁶⁹ EDA, BK/19/1/4/1, Kirkintilloch Municipal Cinema, Financial Papers, Abstract of Accounts for Season 1916-17; BK/19/1/4/2/1, Kirkintilloch Municipal Cinema, Town Hall, Abstract of Accounts for Season 1920-1; *KH*, 24 Sep. 1919, p.4; 1 Sep. p.4; 15 Sep. 1920, p.4.

⁷⁰ *KH*, 5 May, p.4; 12 May 1920, p.4.

The prominence assumed by star names suggests the degree to which programming decisions were also driven by box-office calculations.⁷¹ Municipal screens, like those of their commercial competitors, were more often than not filled by the latest American productions, a pattern which reflected the growing economic power of the Hollywood studios in these years.⁷² To ensure access to attractive material, municipal enterprise often had recourse to what became standard industry practice. Block-booking, which tied a hall to the output of specific production companies, was increasingly adopted by Kirkintilloch's Municipal Pictures from 1916 as the hire of film through Arthur Dent in Glasgow gave the business regular access to the productions of Famous Players/ Lasky in the USA.⁷³ Publicity, designed to maximise the audience for each programme, also followed convention by giving weight to star names. Both Pickford and Chaplin featured on early bills at Clydebank and Montrose and by the spring of 1915, the use of Chaplin's name alone was thought capable of generating interest among Kirkintilloch cinema-goers, given that 'Charlie is so well known and popular that the sight of him on the screen is sufficient to make some people nearly burst with laughter'.⁷⁴ Over time, star appeal was seen to extend well beyond the Hollywood elite. In

⁷¹ For readers anticipating reference here to the major official war film of the First World War, *The Battle of the Somme*, disappointment awaits. The film did not feature at the Municipal Pictures in Kirkintilloch, the one business active on its release in 1916. Instead, it played for three days from 19 Oct. 1916 at the town's commercial picture house, the Pavilion, alongside the first episode of the Pathe Freres serial, *The Perils of Pauline*. Patrons at the Town Hall, by contrast, found diversion in a two-reel Western *The Assassin's Reward*, and an L-KO Billie Ritchie comedy *False Friends and Fire Alarms*, which, despite the competition, together secured the highest takings of that season to date, *KH*, 18 Oct. 1916, pp.4, 5; EDA, BK/19/1/1/1, Municipal Cinema, Kirkintilloch, Cash Book, 1916-17.

⁷² Gerben Bakker, *Entertainment Industrialised: The emergence of the international film industry, 1890-1940* (Cambridge, 2008), ch.6.

⁷³ In possession of Adelphi Films Ltd., Letter, T.D. Hutchison to Messrs. The Newcastle Film Supply, 25 Dec. 1917, <http://earlycinema.gla.ac.uk/blog/omeka/items/show/1601>
The authors are grateful to Adelphi Films Ltd., for permission to cite this letter.

⁷⁴ *KH*, 19 May, p.3; 17 Mar. p.4; 24 Mar. 1915, p.6; Hutchison would later observe that 'our Hall is not large enough when Mary Pickford pays her frequent visits to Kirkintilloch!', In possession of Adelphi Films Ltd., Letter, T.D. Hutchison to Messrs. The Newcastle Film Supply, 25 Dec. 1917, <http://earlycinema.gla.ac.uk/blog/omeka/items/show/1601>

November 1920, the publicity attending the screening at the Burgh Hall, Montrose, of the French film *The God of Luck* (*Le Dieu du Hasard*) made much of the film's lead, Gaby Deslys, described as 'the bewitching Daring Daughter of Dance'. Ms Deslys's death the previous February encouraged local advertising copy to promote this as her 'last and greatest film'.⁷⁵ In other respects, municipal programmes mimicked commercial content: both Kirkintilloch and Montrose used serials, running at times to three a week in the case of the latter, to encourage repeat visits.⁷⁶ Congruence in practice was such that in one week in September 1915 both houses in Kirkintilloch ran their own Chaplin lookalike competitions.⁷⁷

That said, for all the evidence of overlap, municipal managers sought to point up distinctive facets of their contribution to local entertainment culture. For advocates of municipalisation in Montrose associations with improvement were evident:

A night spent in the Municipal Cinema is not wasted, for a healthy amusement and instruction can be got there. In most, if not all, the big picture-stories there is a moral to be derived, so that the visitor is not only interested in the story, but he can often carry away with him a moral lesson.⁷⁸

The respectability of the material on offer was often stressed, so that the Australian production *The Sentimental Bloke* was presented, without it would appear any consciousness of deterring potential patrons, as 'A wonderful Story without a Villain, Murder, Divorce, and

MR, 5 Sep. 1919, p.1; *CRN*, 4 Oct. 1918, p.2.

⁷⁵ *MR*, 4 Nov. 1920, p.4.

⁷⁶ *KH*, 29 Sep. 1915, p.3; *KH*, 5 Jan. 1916, p.4; *MR*, 5 Sep. 1919, p.1; on the growing importance of serials more generally see, Michael Hammond, *The Big Show: British cinema culture in the Great War, 1914-1918* (Exeter, 2006), 36-7.

⁷⁷ *KH*, 8 Sep. 1916, p.4.

⁷⁸ *MR*, 10 Sep. 1920, p.4.

without any trace of suggestiveness or vulgarity'.⁷⁹ The origins of film scenarios in alternative narrative forms be they novel, play or, as in the case of *The Sentimental Bloke*, verse was given prominence in advertisements, further validating claims for respectability.⁸⁰ Finally, the 'Burgh Hall Orchestra', comprising four players and a conductor, was seen to offer patrons a 'feast of music', details of which were published in advance presumably to heighten appreciation of what was almost invariably a diet of established and light classics.⁸¹ In Kirkintilloch also, programming initially gave substance to Gibson and Johnston's educational aspirations for cinema. Shows on Monday evenings in the business's first season, acknowledged to be operating 'at a dead loss', often included films based on historical events or adaptations of major literary works. Early shows included versions produced by the Vitagraph Company of America of *The Lady of the Lake* and *A Tale of Two Cities*.⁸² As was observed of a later screening of the six-reel Hepworth adaptation of *David Copperfield*, 'the display of such pictures will do much to elevate the minds of the people generally'.⁸³ Subsequent programmes included educational film of South African wildlife and an evening devoted to subjects which drew on Scottish history and literature. Alongside a British version of *Black Roderick the Poacher* and an American production of *Auld Robin Gray*, were films on *Mary Queen of Scots* and *Rob Roy*, although which versions were shown is not clear from

⁷⁹ *MR*, 31 Mar. 1922, p.4.

⁸⁰ *MS*, 18 Jun. p.1 for *The Rocks of Valpre*, a Stoll production based on the novel by Ethel M. Dell; 2 Jul. 1920, p.1, for *The Impossible Woman*, an adaptation of the play by C. Hadden Chambers.

⁸¹ *MR*, 29 Oct. 1920, p.4; *MS*, 9 Apr. 1920, p.5, for a programme headed by Mendelssohn's *Ruy Blas* overture; such was the orchestra's appeal, the case was made for the cinema to screen fewer films, allowing more music to be played during the intervals, giving rise to the possibly unique criticism, 'We are getting too much for our money', *MR*, 21 Nov. 1919, p.4; *SC*, 1 Dec. 1919, p.16.

⁸² *KH*, 31 Jan. 1917, p.6; 16 Jun. 1915, p.5; 25 Nov. p.5; 2 Dec. 1914, p.4.

⁸³ *KH*, 28 Apr. 1915, p.8.

the accompanying publicity.⁸⁴ Also uncertain is the audience response to such fare, although the failure to repeat such an experiment suggests that it may not have been overly favourable.

In neither case could the drive for improvement endure in the face of wider economic realities. In Montrose, the fare provided by the Burgh Hall Orchestra, previously a cause for celebration, became somewhat sparer as the Council's Entertainment Committee sought economies in the face of a worsening balance sheet in the early summer of 1921. Among employees of the Municipal Cinema, the conductor and the four instrumentalists were singled out for cuts in pay.⁸⁵ Further west in Kirkintilloch, a combination of limited takings and the occasionally 'noisy behaviour of some young people' ended the Monday screenings before the Municipal Picture's first season had run its course.⁸⁶ When a second evening was revived in 1916, it was on Fridays, a scheduling with a clear commercial rationale, being the day, as Johnston observed, 'when our colliers get their wages'.⁸⁷ Although details of film programmes on offer at the Town Hall are less than complete, available information suggests a preoccupation with the popular, with Famous Players/ Lasky productions supported by a regular diet of comedy shorts and serials.⁸⁸ The degree to which, by 1921, the pictures had seemingly abandoned the original intent to elevate may be seen in the screening in January of that year of film of the heavyweight contest between Joe Beckett of Britain and Frank Moran, 'The Pittsburgh Dentist', from the United States. This was precisely the kind of subject that

⁸⁴ *KH*, 10 Feb. p.5; 24 Feb. 1915, p.3; the coupling of treatments of *Rob Roy* and *Mary, Queen of Scots* suggests productions by Gaumont, Griffiths, *Cinema and Cinema-going*, 283.

⁸⁵ *MR*, 17 Jun. 1921, p.5, noting 'Perhaps there is a glut in the musical labour market at present'; musicians were the target of economies as profit margins narrowed in the early 1920s, Trevor Griffiths, 'Making a Living at the Cinema: Scottish Cinema Staff in the Silent Era', in Caughie, Griffiths, and Velez-Serna (eds), *Early Cinema in Scotland*, 68-90, at 82-3.

⁸⁶ *KH*, 17 Feb. 1915, p.4; as originally announced, Monday shows were suspended for the summer months only. However, they never resumed on a regular basis, *KH*, 10 Mar. 1915, p.4.

⁸⁷ Johnston, *Memories*, 13.

⁸⁸ For example, *KH*, 17 Nov. 1920, p.4, for programmes including the Famous Players' production, *The Woman Thou Gavest Me*, not knowingly undersold as 'the Greatest Film of the century', an episode of the serial *Perils of Thunder Mountain*, and unspecified comedies.

Bennell had prohibited in the Gorbals and which had quickened criticism of Jim Clark in the local council chamber.⁸⁹ In September, the Picture's reputation was further compromised in the eyes of some when a local minister, the Rev. George Galbraith, criticised the exhibition of films which savoured of 'immorality and indecency', specifically *The Tree of Knowledge*, a Famous Players' production which had adultery as its central theme.⁹⁰ As with pricing, programming suggests the growing primacy of the profit motive for municipal managers.

It remains to establish how far any surplus was employed in ways consistent with Keir Hardie's initial aim of benefiting the Common Good. In Clydebank, one argument in favour of direct municipal provision had been that the income generated could provide the basis for the burgh's own Common Good Fund.⁹¹ In practice, however, the margin from the first year's operations was applied in improving the fabric of the Town Hall through the installation of tip up seats rather than in payments intended for the benefit of the wider community.⁹² Formation of a Common Good Fund remained an aspiration of some Clydebank Councillors in the mid 1920s.⁹³ The decision to plough profits back into the business, characteristic of the industry in general, was not unusual. In Johnstone, encouraging early returns prompted moves to boost the hall's earnings potential by enhancing its physical capacity. To that end, managers proceeded to acquire the neighbouring feu in November 1920, limiting disbursements to the town as a whole to a £50 contribution which went towards providing additional seating in the local park.⁹⁴ In Montrose, the comfort of Burgh

⁸⁹ *KH*, 12 Jan. p.4; 19 Jan. 1921, p.5.

⁹⁰ *KH*, 5 Oct. 1921, p.8; by that date, Kirkintilloch exhibitors, in common with others across Scotland, had agreed to show only those films which carried a certificate from the British Board of Film Censors, EDA, 1/1/20, Burgh of Kirkintilloch, Minutes of Town Council, Hall, Park and Plots Committee, 3 Jun. 1920.

⁹¹ *CRN*, 16 Aug. 1918, p.3.

⁹² *SC*, 6 Oct. 1919, p.6

⁹³ *WDA*, CB/1/1/33, Clydebank Town Council Minutes, Hall and Baths Committee, 25 Nov. 1924.

⁹⁴ *SKR*, 13 Nov. 1920, p.14; 26 Feb. 1921, p.13.

Hall patrons received priority above the Common Good, the cost of re-seating absorbing most of the first two years' profit of £1,423.⁹⁵ Only in Kirkintilloch did decisions at least initially follow the route set out by Keir Hardie. A donation to the Common Good Fund of £112 5s. 4d. in the summer of 1915 was sufficient virtually to pay off the deficit on that account.⁹⁶ Thereafter, while funds were made available for a series of Christmas and summer treats for child patrons of the Municipal Pictures, payments also went to the benefit of non-cinema-goers: in 1917, funding the acquisition of a municipal bowling green, while three years later, the Council purchased some 100 surplus suits from the government which were then sold locally for a profit of 2s. each.⁹⁷ Finally, in 1921, councillors on the Pictures Committee oversaw a scheme for municipal holidays, which offered a week at a camp in Rothesay run by the United Co-operative Baking Society at an inclusive charge of £2 6s., or a tour of the battlefields of France and Belgium at an all-in price of £15 each.⁹⁸

If this suggests a stronger commitment to the idea of the Common Good, it is substantially qualified by the scheme which absorbed the greater part of the profits arising from the Pictures in two years of prosperity following the war's end. The plan, announced in October 1919, was for a series of concerts and lectures during the winter months, and drew on an enduring strand of opinion within the I.L.P. in Scotland which favoured the reform of popular leisure through the promotion of rational recreation.⁹⁹ A shift in approach was evident. In 1914, the cinema had appeared a likely vehicle for improving entertainment. Five years of working qualified such confidence and the cool reception audiences accorded the

⁹⁵ *MR*, 16 Jul. 1920, p.6; 15 Jul. 1921, p.5; *MS*, 16 Jul. 1920, p.5; *SC*, 26 Jul. 1920, p.21.

⁹⁶ *KH*, 30 Jun. p.8; 14 Jul. 1915, p.6.

⁹⁷ *KH*, 19 May 1915, p.6; 7 Jun. 1916, p.4; 11 Jul. 1917, p.6; 3 Mar. 1920, p.7; EDA, 1/1/17, Burgh of Kirkintilloch, Minutes of Town Council, Hall and Park Committee, 28 Jun. 1917; Johnston, *Memories*, 23.

⁹⁸ *KH*, 2 Feb. 1921, p.4.

⁹⁹ William W. Knox, *Industrial Nation: Work, Culture and Society in Scotland, 1800-present* (Edinburgh, 1999), 170-1, 198.

more 'artistic' of the live acts booked at the Town Hall confirmed that the cause of rational recreation might be pursued more effectively in other ways.¹⁰⁰ One such, a series of open-air recitals by military bands in the summer of 1919, was endorsed despite recognition that this was likely to run at a loss, estimated at £40. For enthusiasts within the I.L.P., such a cost would be outweighed by the gains to civic and cultural life locally, so that Johnston was of the view that 'If high-class music could be supplied to the people of Kirkintilloch, such as was not supplied elsewhere in Scotland, with the exception of Glasgow and Edinburgh, they should do everything they could to encourage it'.¹⁰¹ Losses were no obstacle while the Pictures continued to show profits. In effect, officially endorsed events, intended to elevate, were to be subsidised by picture-goers. This approach echoed an earlier scheme advanced by Johnston when serving on the local School Board, whereby regular attendance at evening classes was encouraged by the promise of free admission to dance sessions.¹⁰² If, in 1914, cinema had appeared capable of combining entertainment and uplift, its role by 1919 was to satisfy the former thereby offering means by which the latter could flourish.

So, even though the losses anticipated from the military concerts were exceeded, the Pictures Committee, now re-styled the Entertainments Committee of the Council, proceeded with an ambitious programme of concerts and lectures, the latter organised in conjunction with the local Education Authority.¹⁰³ From the start, the results disappointed the hopes of the rational recreationists. The opening concert had set the tone for the season, featuring singers from the Beecham Opera Company and violin solos by the leader of the Scottish Orchestra. For all that, a note of disappointment at the popular response following the second

¹⁰⁰ *KH*, 10 Mar. p.4; 17 Mar. 1920, p.5, which contrasted the muted enthusiasm for the vocal duo of Alberta Flahey and her tenor with the warmth accorded The Mezzellis' comedy gypsy act.

¹⁰¹ *KH*, 18 Jun. 1919, p.2; EDA, 1/1/19, Burgh of Kirkintilloch, Minutes of Town Council, Town Council, 9 Jun. 1919.

¹⁰² Johnston, *Memories*, 18-19.

¹⁰³ *KH*, 27 Aug. p.8; 1 Oct. 1919, p.6.

performance could not be concealed, the view being that it was ‘nothing like what the occasion deserved’.¹⁰⁴ Even leading advocates of municipal enterprise such as Bailie Gibson felt bound to admit that the season could not be considered a success.¹⁰⁵ A second programme of concerts was planned for 1920-1, but only one lecture as opposed to five the previous season, was scheduled. Despite explicit warnings that continued poor support would threaten continuance of the project, by the summer of 1921, aspirations ‘to raise musical appreciation somewhat above the music-hall standard’, which prevailed most Fridays at the Town Hall, had been abandoned.¹⁰⁶ The financial impact of this drive for improvement was marked. Whereas in its first five seasons the Municipal Pictures had generated a profit of almost £943, in the next two years, while cinemas generally were being likened to ‘Klondykes’, the balance sheet at Kirkintilloch moved decisively into the red.¹⁰⁷ The pursuit of rational recreation had, in this instance, been undertaken at the expense of the Common Good.¹⁰⁸

The failure of this experiment had implications for another of the I.L.P.’s favoured projects. Alone among the burghs running Municipal Cinemas, Kirkintilloch voted in November 1920 to go ‘dry’, the decision coming into force at the end of the licensing year at the close of the following May.¹⁰⁹ The triumph of temperance came at a time when the ability to fund alternative amusements was limited by losses incurred on the Pictures account over

¹⁰⁴ *KH*, 8 Oct. p.8; 26 Nov. 1919, p.7.

¹⁰⁵ *KH*, 7 Apr. 1920, p.4.

¹⁰⁶ *KH*, 19 Jan. 1921, p.5; 8 Sep. p.8; 20 Oct. 1920, p.7.

¹⁰⁷ EDA, BK/19/1/4/ 2/1, Abstracts of Accounts for Seasons 1919-20 and 1920-1, reporting losses overall of £44 10s. and £66 12s. respectively.

¹⁰⁸ *KH*, 23 May 1923, p.8, for a summary of the position as seen by a correspondent ‘Something Attempted’, ‘as is well known the committee attempted to develop in the community a higher taste in entertainment, by the running of concerts, etc., with the very best artistes, and a big part of their profits were paid away in this attempt’.

¹⁰⁹ *Scotsman*, 4 Nov. 1920, p.8, the vote was 2032 to 1385 for no licence; in Montrose, by contrast, the result was 2270 to 607 for no change, 3 Nov. 1920, p.9; *Aberdeen Daily Journal*, 14 Mar. 1921, p.6..

the previous two years so that action was confined to the creation of a municipal putting green.¹¹⁰ Private capital funded a more determined effort to address the recreational deficit and ironically centred on the cinema. Some three months after drink licences lapsed, a company was formed to acquire the Black Bull Inn for conversion into a picture house.¹¹¹ Kirkintilloch's second commercial cinema opened in the last days of 1922, by which date the Municipal Pictures, rather than bolstering the temperance cause, had ceased to operate.¹¹²

The fate of the business here as elsewhere was determined by wider economic forces. The slump of the early 1920s, the sharpest contraction the Scottish economy would suffer in the twentieth century, compounded in mining areas by a protracted stoppage of industry in the second quarter of 1921, placed particular pressure on discretionary expenditure¹¹³. The contrast with the burst of prosperity which followed the war intensified the impact of the downturn and is caught by surviving cash books from Kirkintilloch. Expressed in current prices, the figures available to us fail to account for changes in admissions charges and also do not distinguish between the take up of seating at different prices. As such, they are imperfect indicators of the numbers attending the Town Hall. Nevertheless, indirect indications of the level of support may be gained by expressing takings as a percentage of a notional 'capacity', based on the maximum take were all seats filled by patrons paying full prices. When the Town Hall was undergoing construction, a capacity of 1,200 was envisaged,

¹¹⁰ *KH*, 3 Aug. 1921, p.5; opposition to the use of public money to provide alternative amusements had been voiced by Bailie Robert Johnston following the initial vote, 15 Dec. 1920, p.7; *Courier and Argus* [Dundee], 8 Apr. 1921, p.7, 'Generally the idea seems to be, however, that when the pub closes the frequenter has no need of a counter-attraction, and should peacefully vegetate in the bosom of his family'.

¹¹¹ *KH*, 24 Aug. 1921, p.5; NRS, BT2/11828/5, The Black Bull Cinema, Kirkintilloch, Ltd., Memorandum of Association, 9 Aug. 1921.

¹¹² *KH*, 27 Dec. 1922, p.4.

¹¹³ Barry Eichengreen, 'The British Economy between the Wars', in Roderick Floud and Paul Johnson (eds), *The Cambridge Economic History of Modern Britain. Volume II: Economic Maturity, 1860-1939* (Cambridge, 2004), 314-43, at 317; Peter Dewey, *War and Progress: Britain, 1914-1945* (Harlow, 1997), 338-9; Barry Supple, *The History of the British Coal Industry. Volume 4: 1913-1946: The Political Economy of Decline* (Oxford, 1987), 158-61.

with 400 seats in the balcony and the remainder in the area below.¹¹⁴ The figures suggest that prosperity immediately after the war, along with a renewed ability to spend, ensured rising levels of support despite the upward drift in prices.

[Table One here]

The annual figures indicate a peak achieved in season 1919-20. The downturn that followed is to a degree masked here by the use of aggregate numbers, but is brought into sharper focus by more detailed, monthly returns. A marked fall off in support is indicated for April and May 1921, months when local pits were closed by strike action and the final weeks in which Kirkintilloch was 'wet'. That a halving of prices across much of May failed to arrest the slump in attendance provides powerful evidence of the extent of local difficulty.¹¹⁵

[Table Two here]

The end of the three-month stoppage brought little relief locally. Before 1921 had ended, a colliery and a textile factory closed, throwing 400 out of work locally.¹¹⁶ The lack of surviving cash books beyond May 1921 makes it difficult to trace precisely the impact on the Municipal Pictures. Nevertheless, summary accounts paint a grim picture, with takings down over the 1921-2 season by one third, producing a loss on film and variety shows of £92, with an additional £220 outstanding on the rental account for the Town Hall.¹¹⁷ One of the prime justifications for municipal enterprise, its capacity to generate more consistent returns on municipal assets through a greater number of lets, was increasingly undermined. With losses continuing to accrue at the start of the 1922-3 season, and with councillors on the

¹¹⁴ *KH*, 24 May 1905, p.6; *KG*, 7 Sep. 1906, p.3; EDA, BK/1/18/1, Kirkintilloch Burgh Council, Hall Committee Minute Book, 10 Oct. 1907.

¹¹⁵ *KH*, 4 May p.4; 18 May 1921, p.4, where it is noted that the cut was explicitly designed to reflect reduced spending power among the local unemployed.

¹¹⁶ *Scotsman*, 10 Sep. p.13; 24 Dec. 1921, p.12.

¹¹⁷ EDA, BK/19/1/4/2/1, Abstracts of Accounts for Seasons 1920-1 and 1921-2

Entertainments Committee seeing individual liabilities mount, the decision to end municipal involvement in the pictures from the second week of October 1922 was inescapable.¹¹⁸

Problems were not confined to the heavy industrial area, indicating the breadth as well as the intensity of the downturn. A serious fall-off in support for the Burgh Hall in Montrose was noted by the summer of 1922, leading to the appointment of a sub-committee of the Entertainments Committee charged with finding ways of boosting business.¹¹⁹ The recommendations, which included improvements to lighting and a revival in the quality of the musical accompaniment, failed to reverse the decline in the cinema's fortunes and the decision to close followed in March 1923, with a loss of over £2,000.¹²⁰ At Johnstone, as at Kirkintilloch, burgh income bore the weight of business failure with the decision in 1923 to reduce the rent due on the Town Hall pending an improvement in trade. When that did not eventuate, municipal management ceased in July of the same year.¹²¹ If Clydebank held out against closure, it functioned in muted fashion, so that Saturday shows in the Town Hall were not advertised in the local press between the early summer of 1921 and the autumn of 1924.¹²² By that point, enthusiasm for municipalisation had waned to the extent that *The Montrose Review* could conclude, 'it would seem that the cinema is one of the businesses which municipalities are unfitted to manage successfully alongside private competition'.¹²³ This may be considered a harsh verdict, given that losses or depleted profits were recorded widely across the cinema trade in the early 1920s.¹²⁴ However, whereas private operators

¹¹⁸ EDA, BK/19/1/4/2/1, Abstract of Accounts for 6 Sep. to 7 Oct 1922; letter, Ramsy to Byers and Buchanan, Sheriff Officers, 5 Nov. 1922; *KH*, 11 Oct. 1922, p.4.

¹¹⁹ *SKR*, 12 Aug. 1922, p.1.

¹²⁰ *MR*, 13 Apr. p.5; 20 Apr. p.7; 18 May 1923, p.6; 13 Jun. 1924, p.5; *MS*, 21 Jul. 1922, p.7.

¹²¹ *KW*, 5 Jul. 1923, p. 67.

¹²² *CRP*, 3 Jun. 1921, p.4; 3 Oct. 1924, p.4.

¹²³ *MR*, 20 Apr. 1923, p.5.

¹²⁴ Griffiths, *Cinema and Cinema-going*, 119-21; *Era*, 8 Mar. 1922, p.11, for the claim that 'Ninety per cent of the cinemas in the country are running at a loss'.

could attempt to ride out the downturn in anticipation of subsequent recovery, municipal houses lacked both reserves, having expended surpluses on infrastructural improvements or donations to the Common Good, and an obvious rationale in times of limited profitability. The slump thus encouraged a revival of leasing arrangements as councils fell back on the certainty of rental income, avoiding the risks attending more direct involvement in the entertainment business. The record of municipal cinemas came to offer a cautionary tale against renewed local authority action. In Montrose in 1925, calls for the Council to assume control of the harbour led opponents to advise that

Remembrance of the financial debacles that attended such enterprises as the Municipal Dairy and the Municipal Cinema should induce a certain humility and make the Council chary of assuming responsibility for an undertaking which has been, and is being, better managed by another body than some of its own undertakings have been in the past.¹²⁵

IV.

At first sight, this assessment seems both final and fair: Scotland's flirtation with municipal cinema was brief and appears for the most part to have been unproductive. The promise of financial relief had failed to materialise. By 1921, Kirkintilloch stood third among 45 Scottish towns in terms of the level of its rates, while the Common Good Fund, restored to balance by the Pictures's early profitability, recorded a deficit of some £700.¹²⁶ Tangible legacies of this experiment in local authority management also appeared meagre, confined as

¹²⁵ *MR*, 13 Feb. 1925, p.4.

¹²⁶ *KH*, 22 Feb. p.8; 1 Mar. 1922, p.2.

they were in most cases to improved seating in the halls themselves. For Kirkintilloch, gains were to be seen in a bowling green, which ultimately proved another drain on the Common Good, and sartorial improvements for the fortunate few able to take advantage of the bulk purchase of government suits. In financially straitened times, the range of municipal initiatives was reined in, to the extent that Johnston's vision of widespread public engagement in private, profit-making ventures receded in the light of experience, reinforcing the view that public resources were most effectively mobilised where market mechanisms proved ineffectual.

Municipal cinema's faltering record also served to point up differences within the Scottish labour movement over attitudes to popular amusements in general and the moving picture show in particular. Before 1914, it had been possible to see the exhibition of film as consonant with the broader aim of improving the lot of the working class, removing many from the damaging surroundings of the public house. Such confidence was not maintained after the war, as for some on the left in Scotland, cinema came to be seen as an obstacle to desired programmes of reform. In particular, the provision of improved housing appeared to be impeded by the competing demands for manpower and materials generated by an expanding cinema industry with its own ambitious schemes for picture-house building.¹²⁷ 'Anti-cinemamania' in Dundee was an extreme manifestation of a growing scepticism as to the reforming potential of the movies. Significantly, then, when profitability was restored to the exhibition business later in the 1920s, calls for municipalisation did not follow and even the Attlee government's attempt to revive the idea of local ownership after the Second World War generated little enthusiasm in Scottish council chambers.¹²⁸ For many, municipal cinema appeared an idea whose time had passed.

¹²⁷ SC, 22 Sep. p.26; 3 Nov. 1919, p.12; 5 Jan. p.27; 1 Mar. p.29; 15 Mar. 1920, p.29; *ESKR*, 3 Jan. p.5; 31 Jan. p.12; 10 Apr. 1920, p.11.

¹²⁸ *KW*, 11 Mar. p.13; 18 Mar. 1948, p.23.

Yet before it is dismissed entirely as a false and fleeting dawn, municipal cinema's wider contribution to Scottish life in the early to mid-twentieth century merits attention. If aspects of social provision increasingly centred on national government, with its capacity to draw on more productive revenue streams and exploit more extensive scale economies, the municipal was not fully eclipsed as a centre of activity.¹²⁹ Even while councillors in Kirkintilloch continued to offer entertainments at the Town Hall, other municipal ventures were initiated. These included a Savings Bank for local depositors, from which the Corporation would be able to borrow at below market rates of interest to fund housing programmes, and offer the resulting accommodation at lower than usual rentals.¹³⁰ From the beginning, links between the Pictures and the Bank were close. For the 1920-1 season, the Municipal Pictures ran competitions to boost business on Fridays, in which patrons were invited to act as 'Film Censors', offering critiques of the subjects shown. The prize was a 10s. deposit, opening an account with the Municipal Bank.¹³¹ Of more lasting importance, as Johnston noted, the Bank drew on the administrative model followed in setting up the Pictures, being run as a limited liability company with local councillors each taking out a share to act as directors.¹³² As the surge in municipal activity slackened with the economic downturn, the Bank continued to thrive, advances to the Council rising to £97,015 by the mid 1930s, and bearing interest of some 2.63%. By 1926, the model had been adopted by a further eight municipalities across Scotland.¹³³ If the cinema was not itself the standard

¹²⁹ Millward, 'Political Economy', 339-49.

¹³⁰ EDA, 1/1/19, Finance and Law Committee, 9 Oct. 1919; *KH*, 7 Apr. p.8; 12 May 1920, p.3.

¹³¹ *KH*, 22 Dec. p.4; 29 Dec. 1920, p.4, Fridays thus became Bank Book Night.

¹³² Johnston, *Memories*, 24-5.

¹³³ *KH*, 24 Jun. 1936, p.5; 23 Sep. 1926, p.6.

bearer of the municipal idea going forward, it provided the framework for local authority activity that would endure across economic cycles and survive into the next century.¹³⁴

More generally, the idea that cinema was capable of operating for the wider social good, of which municipal control was the latest manifestation, also carried forward into later years to the extent that by the 1940s it could be observed that ‘In Scotland far more than in England the film now plays an ever increasing and useful part in the life of the community’.¹³⁵ Between the wars, halls equipped to show moving pictures were run in association with Co-operative Societies and Miners’ Welfare Institutes, while at Cardenden in Fife, among the amenities funded from the profits of the local Gothenburg pub, overseen by the Bowhill Public House Co., Ltd. was the local Picturedrome.¹³⁶ At the same time, the moving image’s potential for furthering the work of both educational and religious bodies was being explored at both local and national (Scottish) level.¹³⁷ Finally, following another world war, the Highlands and Islands Film Guild would see film as a central factor in ensuring the viability of remote and dispersed areas of population. More specifically, a civic consciousness would be fostered by engaging communities directly in the programming of shows for their immediate area.¹³⁸ All provide indications of the extent to which public life in

¹³⁴ The decision to close the East Dunbartonshire (previously Kirkintilloch) Municipal Bank was taken in October 2014, the company’s dissolution following in September 2017, <https://www.eastdunbarton.gov.uk/news/municipal-bank-closure> (accessed 23 Jul. 2019); <https://beta.companieshouse.gov.uk/company/SC011062/filing-history> (accessed 23 Jul. 2019).

¹³⁵ *Scotsman*, 1 Nov. 1941, p.3; National Library of Scotland, Moving Image Archive, 1/1/251, Scottish Film Council, Minutes, 1939-44, Eighth AGM, 29 Oct. 1941.

¹³⁶ *Kinematograph Year Book, 1930 (Seventeenth Year)*, 527 (Blantyre, Clydebank), 529 (Douglas, Lanarkshire), 539 (Longriggend, Lanarkshire), 542 (Standburn, Stirlingshire).

¹³⁷ Through the Scottish Educational Film Association and the Scottish Churches’ Film Guild, John Bruce Barclay, *The Film in Scottish Schools* (Edinburgh, 1992), 5; *Scotsman*, 22 May 1936, p.13; NRS, GD291/92/1, British Film Institute, Scotland, Scottish Film Council, *Monthly Bulletin*, 2 (8) (Oct. 1936), p.3.

¹³⁸ NRS, ED30/2, Highlands and Islands Film Guild, Proposed Reconstruction of the Financial Basis of the Guild, Council Meeting, 26 Jul. 1946; 29 Jul. 1948..

Scotland continued to be distinguished by efforts to exploit unusual levels of enthusiasm for moving pictures for what was deemed the wider collective or common good. In that respect, transient though it may have been, municipal cinema was wholly in step with institutional, social, and political forces that shaped Scotland's sense of self across much of the twentieth century.

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